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ABSTRACT

Mentors working with students with teacher education portfolios often struggle with how much and what kind of direction to provide to scaffold students' reflections. An analysis of early childhood licensure students' conversations about portfolio making suggests a tri-part framework for the direction mentors offer. First, students ask for definition and clear explanations of external expectations. Second, they develop their own expectations. Finally, they defy external expectations, inventing their own definitions of the portfolio. Focus on one student and her reflections on her portfolio indicates, however, that students may not move through a linear progression from call for definition to development to defiance. Instead of balancing the binaries of structure and freedom, mentors must juggle responses to students' conflicting, but co-existing images of the portfolio in process. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Conversations in the Portfolio Process: Teacher Educators and Early Childhood Licensure Students Learning Together

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Abstract

Mentors of teacher education portfolios often struggle with how much and what kind of direction to provide to scaffold students' reflection. An analysis of early childhood licensure students' conversations about portfoliomaking suggests a tri-part framework for the direction mentors offer. First, students ask for definition and clear explanations of external expectations. Second, they develop their own expectations. Finally they defy external expectations, inventing their own definitions of the portfolio. Focus on Shelli and her reflections on her portfolio process indicate, however, that students may not move through a linear progression from call for definition to development to defiance. Instead of balancing the binaries of structure and freedom, mentors must juggle responses to students' conflicting, but co-existing images of the portfolio in process.

Mentoring the portfolio group for early childhood licensure students at NMSU has both fit and nuanced my sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). I embarked upon the mentoring role with a commitment to the portfolio's potential to mediate between student teachers' practice and reflection (Green & Smyser, 1995). The portfolio was to scaffold students' reflection about teaching, and the portfolio mentor and portfolio support group were to scaffold the portfolio process itself. Now conversations about that process have raised questions for me about the support I offer students, specifically about what kind and amount of direction is "sensitively tuned to their needs" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 20) and likely to scaffold the intended reflection.

At NMSU early childhood portfolios are framed by seven areas of competency -- Child Growth, Development, and Learning; Health, Safety, and Nutrition; Families and Community Collaboration; Developmentally Appropriate Content; Learning Environments and Curriculum Implementation; Assessment of Children and Programs; and Professionalism -- and guided by competencies and indicators approved by the state Departments of Education and Children, Youth, and Families. The portfolios are thus simultaneously highly and loosely structured. The competencies and their accompanying indicators establish fixed parameters within which students develop and select materials according to their own judgments.

To support students in the portfolio construction process, the first course in early childhood education introduces the portfolio and the state competencies. In this course students

begin the skeleton they flesh into their portfolios. Additional licensure courses, based on the state competencies, assign a variety of projects, some of which can be used as or shaped into portfolio installments if students choose. Besides portfolio work done in courses, optional monthly meetings with a faculty mentor are held for students to discuss their portfolios and whatever arises as they develop them.

New Mexico State University's early childhood portfolio process is still under construction. Only recently have early childhood students at NMSU begun to develop portfolios as a requirement for their teaching license. The early childhood program itself is young, with only three graduates thus far. A fourth student will graduate this spring, the first to formally complete a portfolio. Teaching the Introduction to Early Childhood and mentoring the portfolio group, I began learning, with the students, about the program's evolving portfolio process, about the students' views of portfolio development, and about myself as a teacher educator.

Method

This presentation draws upon research from the early childhood program portfolio's beginnings at NMSU. Conversations with Shelli, a Masters level student and the first to develop an early childhood portfolio at NMSU, constitute the primary data source. These, triangulated with other data, have enabled me, the faculty mentor, to critically examine my practice as an early childhood teacher educator.

Towards this end, transcribed data from taped conversations were sorted and compared to categories that emerged in the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Conversations between a student researcher and students in the Introduction to Early Childhood Education course were taped and transcribed by the student researcher to protect the respondents' confidentiality (1). These are analyzed in tandem with conversations with Shelli, as are my field notes, collected during monthly portfolio meetings. Shelli further contributed to the data analysis by reading and commenting on the transcripts and the written report of the research.

Two aspects of this research agenda are described by McWilliam (1994). First, research and teaching are commonly polarized in faculty performance evaluations, for example, but in this project they are inextricably intertwined. This presentation, then, reports on teaching and research as one. Second, students' voices and words are valued over students' reactions to teacher educators' language. What follows is recounted as much as possible in students' words.

Conversations about Portfolios

Conversations with students about portfolios highlighted a dilemma I have had as a teacher educator. On the one hand, students' work in general and on portfolios in specific must be individualized to their styles, strengths, and circumstances to address the diverse qualities of high quality teaching (Green & Smyser, 1995). On the other, motivation, clarity of purpose, and

adequate time are parts of a necessary framework for the creativity of portfolio development (Zidon, 1996). How to balance the apparent opposites of openness and structure was the aspect of my teaching that these portfolio conversations most called into question.

Defining Expectations for the Portfolio

Shelli and I had a long conversation about her portfolio-making about 2 months before her portfolio was due to be completed. She felt she was still in what Zidon (1996) calls the frustration stage. Unfortunately, Shelli thought the next two stages, exploration and demonstration/celebration, were barely in sight. She said:

> It's been (pause) very frustrating. ...every time I'm in the meeting and I'm talking to you about the portfolio I feel like everything clicks and I understand and I tell myself, okay, I'm going to go home and I'm going to be able to do it and this is going to be it. And then I get home and I sit down and I start to do it and it gets all fuzzy again. So it's been, it's been frustrating....

Shelli went on to say that "not having really clear-cut guidelines as to what it should look like is hard."

Clear-cut guidelines were a theme in her interviews, in the portfolio group, and in interviews among students. For the first semester the portfolio group met, students asked questions about the external expectations for their portfolios. Although I requested they bring their portfolio work to the group, most meet-

ings centered on clarifying what the portfolios were to be. At the students' suggestion, a portfolio packet has since been developed as a reference for new students, including ideas that evolved from students at the group meetings.

Guidelines were an equally strong theme when students spoke in confidence about the portfolios. A student said:

> ...we were not real clear on how to do it. And it almost seems the way we did it... I, I, I didn't understand it that well, how I was supposed to do it.

Students knew there were requirements for the portfolios, although such general standards as thoughtfulness and thoroughness were too vague for them. Students repeatedly said they needed to know what was expected of them. One student in particular complained of what she regarded as an inconsistency between the openendedness of an assignment and a professor's knowing "what she wants." She called my attention to my perception that these apparent binaries could live happily together, and to my responsibility to discuss the complexity of this seeming inconsistency with students.

Since Shelli was the first to do a portfolio at NMSU, she had no models. She said, "And, not having an already, a model I guess, to look at has been hard." A vision of the end product, she thought, would help her move from frustration to exploration (Zidon, 1995):

> I guess I just, I don't even have a picture in my mind of what the final portfolio will look like. I can't even see

> where, at this point, I can't see exactly where it's going. I can't envision it at all, which makes it hard for me, because I, if I can see what something's going to be like at the end of it, it's easier to work toward that, but right now I don't even have a picture of what it's gonna be.

The first student to present an early childhood portfolio at NMSU and the only one to graduate with one this semester, Shelli was without a model and without real peer construction of the portfolio process. While her classmates were supportive and some attended portfolio meetings when they could, she did not have a situation where:

> We would all be working on the portfolio at the same time, maybe not doing the same sections at the same time, but really working on it. Not together, but in a way that we are able to share ideas and problems that we've been having with it. ...I think it always helps to see what other people are doing.

Without collaborative support from peers, Shelli was missing the social environment she needed to scaffold her work (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Unfortunately, without the pressure of presenting their portfolios this semester, other students did not work on their portfolios steadily, even when they attended portfolio group meetings. As one student pointed out, "I ...have so many other classes, and have so much other stuff to do... if it's not required, I probably won't do [it]."

Shelli said being the first to do a portfolio was "freaking me out" and felt "kind of weird," not just because of the lack of

peers, but because the idea of portfolios at NMSU was developing as she developed her portfolio. She said:

> I mean it kind of seems like we've been, or you all have been kind of planning it as we go along and I guess I'm not used to that. I'm used to, you know, things being set and knowing exactly how I should do something and (pause, sigh). ...What doesn't work for me personally (laughs) is that this just seems like such a major thing that I feel like all the guidelines should be set already.

The lack of definition was disturbing to her, especially for something this important. Other students seemed to agree. They, too, were used to professors knowing and explaining their expectations. Then accomplished students could note what the professor wanted and work accordingly.

In this, the portfolio process' first year at NMSU, expectations for the portfolios were not fully defined; nor would they be in the future. Although models would be available and the student culture would generate stories about portfolio preparation, the portfolio project leaves too much to each student for it to be defined as clearly as traditional course assignments have led students to expect.

Developing Expectations for the Portfolio

The students' comments about the ill-defined nature of the portfolio at NMSU were put into further perspective when Shelli said:

> I think the reason why (laughs) I'm not learning... what I thought I would be or getting out of it what I thought I

would is that, is just all of the frustration at trying to figure out where, how it all fits together and what it all should look like, and trying to separate the sections.

Although Shelli describes her point in the portfolio process as one of frustration and not learning what she thought she would, she also reveals the degree to which she exp[illegible]s her portfolio to reflect her integrated understandings to-date about teaching. This expectation adds a new dimension to her request for definition. While she would like more clarity, Shelli also is developing and articulating her own expectations for the portfolio.

In trying to scaffold Shelli's work on her portfolio, I worried about being either too directive or of too little help. Risking interference with Shelli's work by offering too much definition, I sketched how I understood a particularly ambiguous aspect of the state competencies. Later Shelli said:

...that map you drew last week, has been really, I can't even begin (laughing) to tell you. I mean, it just helps me to see it, I guess, to see my portfolio a little clearer.

She reminded me, as have other students, to trust students to make their own decisions with the information we offer them.

Shelli's frustration with her work on the portfolio seemed to lie at least in part with the uncertainty that came with not having the finished product in her mind yet. She said:

Uncertainty, I guess, is the big thing. ...the main thing is just feeling uncertain about what I'm doing and what everyone else is thinking I should be doing.... And also

> the uncertainty of wondering what these people who are going to be looking at my portfolio are going to be expecting from it. I think that's the biggest thing.

As Shelli worked on her portfolio, she began to think about what prospective employers would want to see. Instead of asking for guidelines from the university, she made her own judgments, saying, for example, "and I don't think that's what people are going to want to look at when they review my portfolio." With an image of her audience, but without direct mandates from them, Shelli was developing her own expectations for her portfolio.

Defying Expectations for the Portfolio

As Shelli continued to talk about her portfolio, uncertainty, in contrast to a request for clear-cut guidelines, continued as a theme. When I pointed out that classrooms for young children are uncertain places, Shelli agreed but didn't comment. Later, however, she referred to a discussion we had had in an Early Childhood Curriculum class in which some students said they wanted to learn more about methods. Shelli said she and another student talked afterwards:

> I told her ...that I was glad that our classes didn't give us methods because what I'm realizing is that, and I'm sure some of them do work, but for me, every day is so, so different.

As an example, she described her student teaching experience:

> And I can read a book one day and get through the entire thing without anyone saying anything. And the next day I

> can read the same book or a different book and not get past page one, because all [the children] want to do is talk. And, and they say really, really interesting things, that are very, very relevant to them. And I think if I had my way (laughs), I could sit on that carpet area and talk to them and listen to them talk for as long as they wanted to. And, there really is so much to learn from what they say. And I think that's been the biggest thing for me. And I don't think that's come about because of my working on my portfolio as opposed to my experiences. But it's something that I would want to come out in my portfolio, I guess.

According to Shelli, the portfolio could serve as a vehicle for revealing the uncertainties of teaching, the means for learning about children, and some of the ways a teacher can plan emergent curriculum with children.

As we talked, Shelli mentioned the portfolios another group of students were required to do as part of their student teaching. She contrasted their portfolios with her own:

> It seems that what I'm doing is different from what the elementary student teachers are doing in putting together their portfolios. Their guidelines just seem very clear-cut. You put in, you know, your resume. You put in some lesson plans you've done. You put in evaluations. You put in, um, recommendations from your cooperating teacher or the principal, and your transcripts, and, and that's it. And, that, I don't feel like that's what I'm doing. At all. And

> I think I get a little angry (laughs) at the student teachers that are at [the elementary school where I student teach] because I feel like well, I have to do all this other stuff, and you just have to stick all these things into a binder and that's your portfolio.

I asked Shelli if she would rather be doing that and she answered:

> Well, no. I feel like (laughs) what I'm doing is a lot more important, but then at the same time I guess I just. That's just a little itty bitty part of the (pause) frustration, I guess. But it does, it's when I hear them talk about their portfolio it's just very, very, very, very, very, very different. Like I don't even see my portfolio having my transcript in it. It just seems very different.

Shelli contrasted the mechanical production of a portfolio that was already mapped out with her own not pre-determined, intellectually fluid project (2). She did not want the former for herself, yet it rankled that student teachers at the same school were not agonizing over their portfolios as she was over hers.

As our conversation continued Shelli wondered which a principal would prefer. She said:

> Are they gonna rather look at someone's portfolio who does have their transcripts, who does have recommendations, who does have lesson plans of what they've done. Are they gonna rather look at that or at something that seems more, I don't know what mine seems like, more integrated or I don't know. Just not, I guess not as clear-cut. (pause)

Shelli contrasts her portfolio, which is important because it synthesizes her ongoing thinking about teaching, with a more cut and dried portfolio assignment. As she did earlier, she uses "clear-cut," but now instead of implying clarity and focus, the term seems to imply narrowness of scope.

Our conversation ended by adding an additional dimension to Shelli's perception of external expectations of the portfolio. She reflected:

> ...in the beginning I thought, why am doing this if no one's going to want to look at it. But aside from that, I think that in the end it will be something that's going to contribute to, to my learning and my development and hopefully by the time I'm finished with it, it won't matter to me whether or not a principal is going to want to look at it for, you know, a job interview or anything of that sort (long pause).
>
> Rachel: Which sort of takes us back to the uncertainty of wondering what people looking at it will expect, and you're kind of saying maybe by the time you finish
>
> Shelli: it won't matter. I hope.

A Juggle vs. A Balance

My conversations with Shelli could be read as a student's evolution, starting from her discomfort with a "fuzzy" sense of her portfolio. From there she moved to her own developing image of her portfolio, and from there to defending her holistic project. Such a linear reading of Shelli's words, however, could be

patronizing and misleading. I suggest, instead, that her wish for guidelines, her construction of her own personalized portfolio project, and her conviction that it is meaningful simultaneously cohabit the portfolio process. Herein lies my challenge as an educator: how to address the coexisting, but different feelings students experience as they construct their portfolios.

A linear reading of the defining-developing-defying sequence might lead me to dismiss the defining phase as something students will grow out of. Teaching portfolios are "records of both growth and achievement" (Winsor & Ellefson, 1995, p. 69), and students are the ones to assess the processes and products of their teacher education. Yet the NMSU students' request for guidelines was unanimous and seemed a call for the structure within which creativity and personal interpretation can thrive.

I must also ensure the space for students to develop their own visions of their portfolios. The individual's articulation of rationales and the ensuing self-evaluation that occurs during the construction of students' portfolios are precisely what makes portfolios a useful tool (Winsor & Ellefson, 1995). Ross (1996) suggests that students will take the lead developing their portfolios only when the mentor delegates responsibility for learning to the portfolio group. Shelli's comments about the map I drew indicate that the mentor does have a role within the group, as Vygotskian theory (1978) would suggest, but one that requires judicious intervention.

While established criteria can define the tasks, as students in this study requested, students can retain the freedom to de-

velop their portfolios as they see fit within those criteria. Simmons (1996) recommends clearly stating the purposes of the portfolio while avoiding requirements that script it. Questions to which the mentor does not know the answer can frame portfolio work such that the answers surprise and teach the mentor along with the portfolio maker's peers and, ideally, the portfolio maker herself.

Sustained focus on external definitions of the portfolio restrict it to "showplace" vs. "workplace" (Zidon, 1996, p. 66). While many students develop portfolios because they are exit criteria or to please employers, they are most meaningful as a beginning of, rather than an end to, the reflective process. Shelli said as she worked it helped to remember that

> this portfolio is for me, and I find that when I get frustrated with it, if I think of it as something that I am doing for myself, it has much more meaning and value.

Conversations with Shelli and other students have led me to believe that my quandary of how direct to be with students as they work on portfolios is more a juggle than a balance. Instead of balancing polarized extremes of structure and freedom, I have at least three balls to keep in the portfolio's atmosphere: clarity through definition, support for development, and space for defiance. Juggling requires me to hold conflicting images of the portfoliomakers in my mind. Students are at once in need of structure and freedom and not in need of anything at all.

Conflicting co-existing images have become the new theme for portfoliomaking at NMSU and for my teaching in general. Shelli

further illustrated this possibility when she talked about discipline. In a conversation we had had early in the school year, Shelli had told me she wanted to leave the program having learned:

> ...how to deal with, like, discipline issues, I have a hard time being consistent with some of the things that I do.

Once Shelli began student teaching, she complained of other student teachers who seemed to focus solely on discipline. Months after our first conversation, she reread the transcript of our earlier conversation and said she could not believe she had said what she did. Yet, at the time of that rereading, she and I were in the midst of an extended e-mail conversation about a child who had great difficulty with self-control and whom Shelli and I were trying hard to understand. "Discipline" seemed to be simultaneously an unknown to be mastered, a symbol for simplistic solutions, and a quest for understanding.

Another example of conflicting co-existing images arose when Shelli reread what she had told me about wanting a model of a portfolio. Shelli remarked upon rereading that passage in the transcript:

> This comment is surprising to me in that it seems I am contradicting part of my own philosophy on education. I want children to be able to think on their own and use their thinking to create things that are meaningful to them, and here I am wishing that I had a model to follow in creating my personal portfolio.

This confusing aspect of the portfolio process is teaching me about my teaching. Portfolio construction may involve contradicting one's own philosophy, becoming aware of apparent contradictions, allowing them to live together, and all the while trying to understand how that can be possible. Supporting that process would then require accepting students' apparently conflicting positions and scaffolding their work with an ever changing combination of direction, support, and freedom.

I share Shelli's hope when she says of her anticipated portfolio, "It might help me to realize what I do know. And possibly also tell me what to work on." Her portfolio work and the conversations we have about it help me realize some things I do know and tell me what to work on, too.

Notes

1. These data were gathered by Tonya Lyles as part of a project funded by Eastern New Mexico University's Center for Teaching Excellence.

2. The phrases "mechanical production" and "intellectual fluidity" were suggested to me by Jeanette Haynes, whose feedback during the writing of this paper has been invaluable.

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